

May 5, 2019 – Revelation 5:1-14

If you weren't here last week, we tackled one of the most difficult books of the Bible to understand. The book of St John's Revelation. And, I'm pleased to say, the congregation's reaction to it was even better than I had hoped. Clearly, people want to understand this strange book.

Which makes sense. Because the book of Revelation is what's known as apocalyptic literature. Now, I promised you last week that I wouldn't overwhelm you with big words. But if you'll bear with me, I'd like to use just this one this week and teach you what it means.

Apocalyptic literature is a type of writing that uses symbols to reveal prophetic events. Objects and numbers and animals and such to tell, frankly, bizarre stories about the past, present, and future.

And there are four apocalyptic books in the Bible: Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and the Revelation. They are all books of prophecy, written in a mind-bending code with some trully wierd images. But, if you can make sense of all the symbolism, they also have some pretty profound messages for us.

Of course, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah are all Old Testament books. Books written hundreds of years before the Revelation. And St John was quite familiar with these texts. And so it probably shouldn't surprise us that virtually all of the symbols and images in the Revelation are echoes of these older books.

And so we read in Ezekiel chapter 2, *“When I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And he spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back.”* And we read in Daniel chapter 12, *“But you, Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end.”*

And this sounds an awful lot like this first verse of our reading from Revelation chapter 5, *“Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals.”*

John's not just throwing some random apocalyptic image here that we'll never make sense of. He's feeding us images taken from other apocalyptic books so that we have a way to decode this bizarre text. So, in order to understand this passage from the Revelation we also must first understand these other passages from Ezekiel and Daniel and, later, from Zechariah.

Which means first we need to know what this scroll is. This scroll that's written within and on the back – front and back – sealed with seven seals that, at first, no one can open. Well, in both Ezekiel and Daniel, this scroll is a symbol of God's will.

In Ezekiel, it's written on the front and back as a symbol of completeness. Today, we take paper for granted. It's cheap and easy to get. It's commonplace to see a blank page in a book. But in the ancient world, paper and papyrus were extremely expensive and hard to get. And so you wouldn't waste one scrap of it. And if you were writing on a scroll, you would write from edge to edge, front and back. You would fill it until not a single word could be added to it.

This was the message that God gave to Ezekiel to deliver to the people. A complete message of his will, of everything he could possibly tell his people, to which nothing can or should be added. And this is also the message of the scroll in the Revelation. It is a complete message of God's will.

The same is true of this seal on the scroll. In Daniel, this sealed book is the future of God's people. His will for them, once again. And it is sealed up because no one can know what that book contains until the time comes for it to be opened.

In other words, God tells Daniel that he has a plan for Israel. But no one can know it until God is actually ready to carry it out. And so, until then, the message is shut and sealed.

Until this moment in the Revelation. When John sees God the Father sitting on his throne, holding this sealed scroll. Knowing that its content are the most important things that God's people will ever hear. Because in it is written God's entire will. His entire plan for our future and our salvation.

Important stuff. There's just one problem: There's no one who can open it. This scroll is like a contract. It is God the Father's detailed instructions of everything he wants done until the end of time. And whoever opens it is taking on the responsibility of carrying out that contract. Of not just reading God's will. But also doing God's will.

And there's no one who is worthy to open it. No one in all of creation has the power and wisdom and holiness to do what God's will demands. No one in all of creation is without sin. Not you. Not me. Not the martyrs of the church around the throne of God. Not St John himself.

And so it remains unopened. And John weeps. Because the future of all of God's people – the future of God's entire plan of salvation – rests on someone being able to open that scroll and do God's perfect will.

But, it turns out, there is someone who is able to open it. The lion of the tribe of Judah. The root of Jesse. The Lamb of God. He can open it.

All three of these are names for Jesus. The lion of Judah refers to the prophecy that Joseph made to his son Judah on his deathbed. That one of his descendants would be a lion who would rule over all the earth.

The root of Jesse refers to David, the son of Jesse. And to the prophecy of Isaiah, who said that even though David was dead and the family tree of Jesse was cut down, a new shoot would spring up from the root of Jesse and be the savior of God's people.

And the Lamb of God. Spoken of by the great prophet, John the Baptist, who cried out when he saw Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

That Lamb now stands before John, looking as though it had been slain. Which is really kind of an oxymoron. *“I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.”* How exactly does a lamb stand as though it had been slain? Well, probably about the same way that Jesus stood before his disciples, looking as though he had been slain. With nail marks in his hands and feet, and a spear mark in his side.

This slain Lamb of God stands there with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God. What in the world is that all about? Well, this is about as apocalyptic as you get. First, in apocalyptic literature, the number seven is important. It's a reference back to the seven days of creation. And it's a way of saying something is perfect and complete and holy. Just like those seven seals we talked about earlier: perfect seals binding up the perfect will of God.

Second, horns are often a symbol of strength and power. In Daniel, the horns of the beast are a symbol of its power to conquer the earth. And we hear throughout the Old Testament God described as the horn of our salvation. The one with the power to save us. So to have seven horns simply means to be almighty in power.

Similarly, to have seven eyes is to be perfect in knowledge. In chapter 4 of the book of Zechariah, we hear about those exact same seven spirits and seven eyes of God, which range over all the earth. All seeing and all knowing. Perfect in wisdom and judgment.

This almighty, all-knowing Lamb of God takes the scroll and opens it. And when he does, everyone gathered around him cries out, *“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”*

In other words, Jesus, by doing the Father's will, shedding His blood, and dying on the cross, proved that he is worthy to carry out His Father's plan for all of creation. Though he was born as a human, lived as a human, and died as a human, his frail humanity took nothing away from his perfect, almighty divinity.

And he is worthy to carry out the Father's plan of salvation for his people. He is worthy to sit as ruler over heaven and earth. He is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing, forever and ever.

And that, my friends, is John's message for us. That, first, God has a plan. He's had a plan all along. From before the days of Ezekiel and Daniel, to the days of St John, and to today, he has a plan. It is as unchanging as the words written in a book, as complete as a scroll filled front and back, and as perfect as the seven days of creation. God has a plan.

And that, second, he has entrusted that plan to Jesus Christ our Lord. The Lion of Judah. The Root of Jesse. The Lamb of God who was slain. Jesus has taken that plan of salvation and said, "I will open the scroll. I will carry this out. I will do my Father's will. Even though it means dying on a cross."

And that is amazing news for us. Because it means we are in the end times. And have been since Christ ascended into heaven. Jesus did not just ascend into heaven to twiddle his thumbs while we suffer here below. The Lamb who was slain is sitting on his throne. Hearing the prayers of the saints rise before him like incense. And carrying out the will of his Father for us until the end of days.

And for that, we can be supremely grateful. Because not only does it mean an end to all this sinfulness on earth, that so desperately needs to end. But it means that we have one working on our behalf who loves us so much that he was willing to lay down his life and die for us.

The Lamb who was slain was slain for us. His blood ransomed all people. Thank God no one in all of creation was able to open that scroll except Jesus. Because there is no one in all of creation you would rather have carrying out God's will for you than Jesus himself.

Who loves us and cares for us and dies for us and rises for us. "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" Amen.